Collecting Primary Data: Observation

Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Describe some of the advantages and disadvantages of the observational approach.
- Select an observational approach appropriate to a given research objective.
- Analyse and interpret observational data.
- Produce observational data that are valid and reliable.
- Use observational methods in an ethical manner.

Observation is not simply a question of looking at something and then noting down 'the facts'. Observation is a complex combination of sensation (sight, sound, touch, smell and even taste) and perception. A ringing sound in the office might be a telephone, an error signal from the new fax machine or the fire alarm! On hearing such a sound, we would have to use some experience from the past as a guide to interpreting it, and to give it meaning. Think of those people who have, say, lost their memories as a result of an accident, and the problems they face in their lives, re-interpreting sensations from scratch. Meanings (concepts) are stored in memory, as is in people's minds and are individual interpretations of 'reality'. Hence, when a door is left open in the corridor, one worker may see this as a welcome way of improving air circulation in the office, while another worker (the safety representative) sees this as a safety hazard if it is a fire door!

The interpretation of 'meaning' is one of the benefits but also potentially one of the drawbacks of the observation method. On the positive side, observation provides an opportunity to get beyond people's opinions and self-interpretations of their attitudes and behaviours towards an evaluation of their actions in practice. For example, we might ask people their views about working with the opposite sex and find that, through a questionnaire and a set of interviews, most state that they find this constructive and rewarding. A researcher, however, spends a month in the organization listening to conversations and observing behaviour and finds barely concealed hostility and 'backbiting' among quite a significant proportion of male shopfloor workers against their female counterparts.

As we shall see, one of the drawbacks of observation is that the interpretation of what is observed may be influenced by the mental constructs of the researcher (including their values, motivations, prejudices and emotions). We often 'see' what we want to see and disregard other phenomena that could prove important. Secondly, if stationed among those who are being observed, the researcher may begin actually to influence events. Furthermore, while the data gathered from observation are often rich in evidence, extracting themes and concepts from the data can be quite challenging.

The observational method is often associated with ethnographic methodology in that it studies people in their natural settings or 'fields'. Ethnography, however, can also entail the use of other methods such as in-depth interviewing, and the analysis of personal documents.

APPROACHES TO OBSERVATION

Observation involves the systematic viewing of people's actions and the recording, analysis and interpretation of their behaviour. Saunders et al. (2000) differentiate between participant and structured observation. Participant observation is largely qualitative and emphasizes the meanings that people give to their actions, while structured observation is largely quantitative and focuses on the frequency of their actions. Within each of these categories the researcher can collect the data covertly by hiding their identity, or collect the data overtly (see Figure 10.1).

Overt and covert observation

Overt observation is where those being observed are aware that the observation is taking place. By contrast, covert observation is where they are unaware of this. One of the arguments in favour of covert observation is that people may change their behaviour when they know they are being observed, thus threatening the validity of the results. The problem with covert observation, of course, is that it can be construed as unethical. Consider your own feelings - how would you feel if you discovered that someone, perhaps in your own organization, and, say, with the approval of management, had been observing you performing some element of your work? Douglas (1976), however, considers it legitimate to conduct covert observations since people try to obscure the truth through misinformation, evasions, lies and 'fronts'. In practice, the extent to which participants in a research project are informed that they are being observed ranges from full disclosure to no disclosure at all, with many projects somewhere in the middle. As Berg (1995) comments, some subjects are so sensitive that it might be impossible to carry out research by any other means. It is worth noting that most communication within organizations today takes place via e-mail and that all these messages are stored and can be analysed. The laws on how this is done, and what consequences result, vary between countries, but, in a sense, covert observation is now part of our everyday lives.
If covert observation is undertaken, it is essential that confidentiality is still respected. Hence, the names and locations of those being observed should not be revealed to any sponsor of the research. Case Study 10.1 provides an illustration of how covert observation can produce unexpected findings.

**Case Study 10.1 How smart is covert observation?**

A company running a Holiday Village has just introduced a smart card for its customers so that the customer can:

- Check in on arrival using the smart card without having to get out of the car.
- Pre-book facilities such as bicycle hire and the hire of tennis courts.
- Open their lodge door.
- Use the card instead of making credit card or cash transactions.

A covert participant researcher with knowledge and expertise in smart card technology enters the Village as a 'guest' to observe the 'customer experience' in using the cards. As a covert observer she is able to note some of the problems guests experience with the system including:

(Continued)
their interactions with their social environment to explore how it changes their ideas and behaviour, and even their own reflexive awareness of these changes. As Gans (1999) warns, ethnographic research of this kind usually involves months or even years of research. It is therefore costly. Hence, much participant observation tends to be in public health and medical institutions that are often supported by some of the larger funding agencies.

In undertaking participant observation one of the challenges is to maintain a balance between 'insider' and 'outsider' status. To gain a deep understanding of people’s lives it is essential that the researcher gets both physically but also emotionally close to them — but how then does the researcher maintain a professional ‘distance’? Achieving this is often affected by issues such as the gender, race, social class and the education of the researcher compared to that of the people being researched. Burgess (1984) also adds that age can sometimes be an issue — it is practical for researchers of more advanced years to observe youth gangs, for example? As one set of researchers put it:

The more one is like the participants in terms of culture, gender, race, socio-economic class and so on, the more it is assumed that access will be granted, meanings shared, and validity of findings assured. (Merriam et al., 2001: 406)

To remain an 'outsider' would be to fail to gain the kind of rapport that is needed to make this method a success. The participant observer, in a sense, needs to be both inside and outside the setting. Indeed, Merriam et al. (2001) argue that the boundaries between the two positions are not simple or clearly delineated. Being inside or outside is relative to a whole host of cultural and social characteristics and is a position that can shift over time. According to Hall (2000), the best the ethnographer can achieve is to negotiate a position in which one is in some way 'at home' and considered as 'one of us' without becoming completely immersed.

Participant observation can be contrasted with research using a questionnaire where it is often not possible to verify whether people are telling the truth, or if their perceptions of their own behaviour or attitudes are accurate. In contrast, with participant observation it can be possible to interpret some of the subtleties of meaning in the data. Most organizations, for example, and particularly large ones, will contain a variety of social groups, each of which has, to a certain extent, its own norms, standards, attitudes and even culture and language. Contrast the cultures of those who work in the human resources department with those who work in security. Working amongst groups may reveal a whole set of norms and attitudes that would simply not emerge from more traditional research methods.

Cohen and Manion (1997), referring to the work of Bailey, suggest that participant studies are of value in that they:

- Are effective at observing non-verbal behaviour.
- Are immediate in the sense that they elicit data on events as they happen.
- Allow for a more natural relationship to develop over time between the researcher and respondent.

But, clearly, such methods are also open to criticism of bias and subjectivity.

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in a school, provides a list of potential data sources (see Table 10.1). Any of these data features could be followed up by more focused questions dealing with each area in more detail. While there are a variety of ways in which observational data are collected, two of the most widely used are the writing of field notes and the use of more structured data collection methods.

### Field notes

According to Bailey, field notes are ‘the backbone of collecting and analyzing field data’ (1996: 80). They are absolutely essential to the success of fieldwork, and comprise everything the fieldworker believes to be of importance. The danger of taking field notes is to fail to note a situation in the belief that it will always be recalled at a later date. The field researcher should guard against this kind of optimism. In general, field notes should be written up immediately following the observation. Bailey (1996) suggests that field notes develop out of an analytic process. First, the researcher must attempt to mentally capture and remember as much detail as possible: who was in the field setting, what did they look like, what did they say, how did you feel about them, etc. These constitute mental notes, which can be recalled latter to aid the production of jotted notes. Jotted notes comprise observations taken in the field that act as a kind of aide-mémoire for the later production of more comprehensive field notes, of which there are several components (as illustrated in Figure 10.2):

- **Primary observation**: chronological log. Raw data (i.e., no explanations or analysis) of observations on people, their surroundings, behaviours and conversations. Each set of field notes is dated and the time of occurrence noted. It is important to distinguish between actual verbatim quotations and approximate recall of conversations. You could, for example, put all real quotations in quotation marks and leave the general paraphrasing of conversations without such quotations.
- **Reflection and recall**: Some of these will be stimulated from jotted notes and some recalled during the process of writing up field notes. Sometimes objects or events do not seem important at the time but are then recalled when they occur again.

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**TABLE 10.1 FEATURES OF SOCIAL SITUATIONS AS A BASIS FOR OBSERVATIONAL DATA SOURCES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data features</th>
<th>Features of a school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Layout of classrooms and offices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>The people involved in the situation and their names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>The various activities of people in the setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects</td>
<td>The physical elements present such as furniture and its position in the room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts</td>
<td>The actions of individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>Activities such as school assemblies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>The time sequence of the school such as lessons, breaks and lunch hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>The activities people are attempting to accomplish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>Emotions in particular contexts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from Burgess, 1984*

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**FIGURE 10.2 THE DATA GATHERING PROCESS (ADAPTED FROM ELLEN, 1984)**

- **Pre-analysis data**: ideas and inferences. Themes and insights may start to emerge. Do not try to censor yourself at this stage, but write down anything that occurs to you— even when in the field. Indeed, Burgess (1984) advises the use of wide margins for field notes so that there is space to add preliminary categories. Make sure that a distinction is maintained between observational and analytical notes, even though they may be written at virtually the same time.
- **Experiential data**: impressions and personal feelings. These can often be a useful source of analytic insights at a later stage. So write down everything you can think of, including your feelings about events, people, conversations and your interpretations of your emotional reactions. These kinds of notes might be kept in the form of a diary.
- **Forward planning**: This might involve planning to revisit the field to collect missing data or to plan the next stage of the research project.

Once the field notes are completed, they can be written up along with any visual media that have been collected, such as photographs or audio tapes, and held as a permanent record. Burgess (1984) also recommends the drawing of diagrams to show, for example, the arrangements of furniture and people’s sitting positions (especially for the recording of groups). Even at this stage, people, events or instances might be recalled that did not appear in the field notes, but which can now be recorded. This permanent written record (Figure 10.2) provides the basis for the primary analysis of the data.

What do field notes actually look like? Obviously, there are no rigid rules that define the answer. But it should be noted that too much data is better than too little. It is also usually far from clear when in the field as to which data are going to be relevant and which of little value. Hence, try to be as comprehensive as possible. Presented in Figure 10.3 is an example of inadequate field notes (left column) against a set of more detailed, descriptive notes.
Data Collection Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inadequate field notes</th>
<th>Improved field notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The till worker served a customer but gave her scant attention. | Date: May 4th 2002  
Location: Cafe Talk  
Time In: 11:15  
Time out: 11:30 |
| Description: There was a smell of tried food mixed with disinfectant. Young, white male (about 20 years of age), medium height and build, wearing staff canteen smock, short, neat, brown hair. Right ear pierced.  
The till worker looked up at the customer as she approached the till, but then looked away. He adjusted the till roll and opened and closed the cash till twice. He made no eye contact with the customer when she arrived at the till, and smoothed his hand through his hair. I felt that this was an unhygienic thing to do, I felt a sudden rush of antagonism towards him that I then tried to repress.  
He began entering the price of the coffee, soup and cake into the till, stated the price and held out his hand (again no eye contact made). He gave the customer some change, said 'Cheers' and closed the till. He turned away from the customer before she walked away, and shouted for more change from the adjacent till.  
Things to do: Return to Cafe Talk tomorrow to make observations of other staff and to observe their interactions with customers. |

FIGURE 10.3 OBSERVATION OF TILL SERVICE IN A BUSY STAFF CANTEEN, ILLUSTRATING INADEQUATE NOTES (LEFT) AND MORE COMPREHENSIVE NOTES (RIGHT)

Activity 10.2

Uncover the facts. Make evidence centric.

• Observe their behaviour.  
• Listen carefully.  
• Notice body language.

Suggested questions are enclosed at the end of the chapter.

COLLECTING PRIMARY DATA: OBSERVATION

Like all note-taking, the way in which field notes are written up will depend on the researcher. Some wait until they have left the observational setting and write up their notes immediately. Others make cryptic notes during the observation and translate these later into field notes, usually as a computer file. In terms of content, field notes should contain:

- Key quotations, reproduced verbatim.
- Details of the physical appearance of inhabitants: gender, height, physical build, age, ethnicity, clothes, style of hair, appearance of jewellery, etc.
- Observation of verbal behaviours such as the verbatim text of conversations, the characteristics of the speech and the speaker (use of slang or technical language); who does most of the talking and whose suggestions are followed and whose ignored; who interrupts and who does not; the tone of the conversation (polite, bored, hostile, formal, indifferent, etc.)
- Observation of non-verbal behaviours such as body language—facial expressions, body posture (arms folded in front is usually a defensive posture), how they move (confident or diffident?), length and frequency of eye contact.
- The time of events and activities.
- The alteration of names and places to assist in the promotion of confidentiality (but a list of pseudonyms should be kept so the same name can be allocated to each term used).
- The researcher's views and feelings at the time of the observation.

In making field notes, Berg (1995) also suggests that the researcher:

- Records key words and phrases while in the field.
- Makes notes about the sequence of events.
- Limits the time spent in the field, since every hour will take 4 hours to write up (at least).
- Writes up full notes immediately on exiting the field. It is not worth undertaking any further observation until this is done.

The reproduction of field notes can be accomplished quite simply using a word processing program. Alternatively, you might consider using a specifically designed software program that provides facilities for data storage and later content analysis.

Having described in some detail the process of observing and writing up field notes, it is worth heeding de Laine's (2000) words of caution. She argues that in producing field notes, the researcher brings personal meaning to the account created. In other words, field notes are not 'raw data' in the simple sense, but details that are sieved from all the possible data through the researcher's mental constructs, understandings and interpretations.